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PARAPHRASING CAN BE DANGEROUS: A LITTLE EXPERIMENT

PETER PRÜFER & MARGRIT REXROTH

Paraphrasing is a well known cognitive technique: Respondents are asked to repeat a question in their own words. Paraphrasing permits the researcher to examine whether the respondent understands the question and interprets it in the manner intended.¹

We conducted a little experiment to find out to what extent the paraphrasing technique would be really able to produce valid information about that point.

Some time ago, we conducted a cognitive pretest for the **ALLBUS**, the German General Social Survey. The pretest sample was a quota sample with 20 persons. Among the questions we had to test, was the following one:

Here is a card with different political activities. Please tell me to what extent you personally could have an influence to reach a political goal. Please tell me for each activity, whether you think your personal influence would be very effective, rather effective, not very effective or not effective at all.

Int.: Show card 1

CARD 1

- very effective
- rather effective
- not very effective
- not effective at all

A - Express your opinion to friends and acquaintances and at work

B - Vote at elections

D - Participate in a citizens' action group

E - Voluntary work for a political party

H - Occupy houses, factories or government offices

M - Take part in an authorised demonstration

N - Not vote at elections out of protest

¹ This Definition is taken from Esposito, J., 2003: A Lexicon of Questionnaire Evaluation Terminology: Concepts and Working Definitions (unpublished).

One of the most important aspects of this question is, that respondent have to consider their own political activities and not political activities in general. Therefore our main goal was to get information about this aspect:

Did the respondents consider their own political activities in the way intended?

We wanted to know, whether the paraphrasing technique would be able to give us information about this important aspect. Our expectations were not very great because we knew that paraphrasing is a technique which works more generally and is more effective when you want to find out how the whole question is interpreted. On the other hand, the aspect of "their own participation" was so important, that it seemed to be plausible, that the paraphrasing answers could give us information whether the respondents had considered this specific aspect or not.

In a first step, we used the paraphrasing technique: After the respondent had answered the whole question (all items), we asked:

"Could you please repeat the question in your own words."

In a second step, we asked a special probing question directly after the paraphrasing:

"When you answered the question, did you consider your own participation?"

We put the answers of the respondents into two categories:

Category 1: Answers which didn't mention the aspect of "their own participation"

Category 2: Answers which mentioned the aspect of "their own participation"

Of course we sometimes had the problem of interpretation. We decided to put the answers into the categories according to their meaning.

Table 1: Distribution of the answers in the two categories

Paraphrasing	
Category 1: Answers which <u>didn't mention</u> the aspect of the "own participation"	13 Cases
Category 2: Answers which <u>mentioned</u> the aspect of the "ow participation"	7 Cases

Category 1

Let’s first have a look at Category 1: In all 13 cases, the only we can say is, that paraphrasing failed to give us useful information about our point of interest.

The following table shows three examples (out of these 13 cases) of paraphrasing answers which explicitly didn’t mention the aspect of "their own participation”:

Table 2: Three examples of paraphrasing answers which didn’t mention the aspect of the “own participation”

ID	Paraphrasing answers
1	<i>“How effective are the possibilities of political participation.”</i>
2	<i>“Whether the items listed contribute to realize a political aim.”</i>
19	<i>“Altogether how you participate in political life.”</i>

And now, let’s have a look at how these three respondents answered the following probing question:

“When you answered the question, did you consider your own participation?”

Table 3: Comparison between paraphrasing answers and probing answers

ID	Paraphrasing answers	Probing answers
1	<i>“How effective are the possibilities of political participation.”</i>	"Yes"
2	<i>“Whether the items listed contribute to realize a political aim.”</i>	"Yes"
19	<i>“Altogether how you participate in political life.”</i>	"Always"

In category 1 we totally counted 7 cases of this type: Respondents who didn’t mention their own participation but had considered it when answering the question.

Category 2

Let's now have a look at Category 2: As we noted at the beginning, 7 cases fell into this category. The following table shows three examples (out of 7 cases) of answers which mentioned the aspect of "their own participation" :

Table 4: Three examples of paraphrasing answers which mentioned the aspect of "their own participation"

ID	Paraphrasing answers
7	<i>"What impact my opinion has on my environment. Can I move anything at all."</i>
8	<i>"My influence, which I can bring to bear on political decisions, e.g. with regard to acquaintances and friends, dependent on how convincing I present my opinion."</i>
12	<i>"How effective my own personal efforts are or would be, in order to realize certain political ideas and exert an impact."</i>

And now, let's have a look at how these three respondents answered the probing question:

"When you answered the question, did you consider your own participation?"

Table 5: Comparison between paraphrasing answers and probing answers

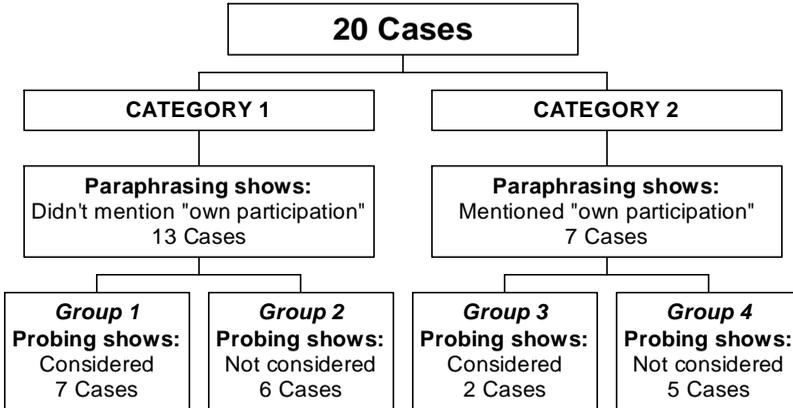
ID	Paraphrasing answers	Probing answers
7	<i>"What impact my opinion has on my environment. Can I move anything at all."</i>	<i>"No, I thought more general."</i>
8	<i>"My influence, which I can bring to bear on political decisions, e.g. with regard to acquaintances and friends, dependent on how convincing I present my opinion."</i>	<i>"No, I make myself rather comfortable, when it deals with political things"</i>
12	<i>"How effective my own personal efforts are or would be, in order to realize certain political ideas and exert an impact."</i>	<i>"I thought rather general, I didn't rather think of me. At A and B I thought general, at D personally and the rest in general."</i>

In category 2 we totally counted 5 cases of this type: Respondents who mentioned their own participation but had not considered it when answering the question.

Summary Results

The following flowchart gives an overview about how the 20 cases are distributed over the two paraphrasing categories and the four probing alternatives.

Flowchart 1: Distribution of paraphrasing answers and probing answers



Let's first have a look at the two paraphrasing categories: They show that in 13 out of 20 cases the respondents had not mentioned "their own participation". The remaining 7 cases showed that the respondents had mentioned "their own participation".

Furthermore, the flowchart shows that in group 2 and group 3 the results from paraphrasing and probing are corresponding (totally 8 cases).

The results in group 1 and in group 4 however indicate clearly, that the results from paraphrasing and probing are not corresponding (totally 12 cases).

The results in group 1 show that in 7 cases paraphrasing had not provided the information that the respondents actually had considered their own participation.

The results in group 4 show that in 5 cases respondents had mentioned their own participation in their paraphrasing answers but had not or not always considered their own participation when answering the question. These results in group 4 are insofar amazing, as one should actually assume, that respondents who mention a certain aspect when they repeat a question in their own words would also have considered this aspect when answering the question.

Conclusions

The results of our experiment show:

- Even if respondents didn't mention an important aspect of a question when they tried to repeat it in their own words, they might have considered it in the manner intended when answering the question.

That means: Paraphrasing answers may be misinterpreted because sometimes they don't show that respondents had actually considered important aspects or had actually understood the question in the way intended.

- Even if respondents have mentioned an important aspect of the question when they tried to repeat it in their own words, they might not have considered this important aspect when answering the question.

That means: Paraphrasing answers may be misinterpreted because sometimes they include information which appears to show that respondents had considered important aspects or had understood the question in the way intended even though they actually had not considered these aspects or had not understood the question in the way intended.

Therefore our recommendations are:

- Deal carefully with paraphrasing answers.
- Don't draw any conclusion from paraphrasing answers to the actual response behaviour unless verifying it with other techniques.
- Use paraphrasing only as a starting point for additional techniques, such as probing.

Otherwise paraphrasing can be dangerous.

References

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Appendix

Answers to paraphrasing and answers to probing

ID	Cat.	Answers to paraphrasing	Answers to probing
1	1	"How effective are the possibilities of political participation."	"Yes"
2	1	"Whether the items listed contribute to realize a political aim."	"Yes"
3	2	"Whether my personal activities are effective or not."	"Yes"
4	1	"Which activities I regard as very efficient to not efficient at all with regard to politics."	"No, rather on collectivity"
5	1	"How my stance is towards the different items, how effective I think the different items are."	"No"
6	2	"Whether I can move something."	"Yes"
7	2	"What impact my opinion has on my environment. Can I move anything at all."	"No, I thought more general"
8	2	"My influence, which I can bring to bear on political decisions, e.g. with regard to acquaintances and friends, dependent on how convincing I present my opinion."	"No, I make myself rather comfortable, when it deals with political things"
9	1	"I have not listened carefully, do not remember."	"Yes"
10	1	"What I personally think is effective or not effective in order to reach some goal."	"Yes"
11	1	"It is on the opinion, I have about parties and the ways to participate in different areas."	"Yes, but personally it is not very effective."
12	2	"How effective my own personal efforts are or would be, in order to realize certain political ideas and exert an impact."	"I thought rather general, I didn't rather think of me. At A and B I thought general, at D personally and the rest in general."
13	1	"I am supposed to classify activities according to efficacy."	"No, I thought of activities which anybody can carry out."
14	1	"Do not remember"	"Not always, my answers were quite general, at A I thought of my own activities, at B in general."
15	1	"Whether the items mentioned are effective."	"Sure yes, but not absolutely."
16	2	"What I personally can reach in different areas, when I utter my opinion. What impact I personally think to be able to exert."	"Not absolutely of my own participation, but what I think about it. At H and N I didn't think personally, but about my feelings, when I read that."
17	1	"Now I am getting confused a little bit, I do not know anything any more. Given that this is all new to me."	"No, I can't do anything by myself."
18	1	"I only have A, B, C in my mind, yes, friends and acquaintances, whether that was effective."	"Yes to all"
19	1	"Altogether how you participate in political life."	"Always"
20	2	"Whether I personally, if I personally participate, whether I can move something."	"Only sometimes, at B and M"